

Natural and Organic Beef
Max Irsik DVM, MAB
Beef Cattle Extension Veterinarian
University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine

What is “natural” or “organic” beef? As natural and organically grown cattle become more common in the marketplace so do questions from beef producers and consumers. Beef producers are asking questions about the production of natural and/or organic beef and the marketing opportunities that may be available. Consumers are asking questions about the healthfulness and advantages of natural and organic beef.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides statistics for organic production with the state of Florida. Within the state and as of 2008 there were 172 certified organic or exempt organic farms. The definition for an organic farm is: all farms and handling operations that display the "USDA Organic" seal must be certified by a State or private agency that ensures the National Organics Standards are followed. The definition of an exempt farm is; one that follows the National Organic Standards and has less than \$5,000 in annual sales can be exempt from certification. These exempt farms can use the term "organic" but cannot use the "USDA Organic" seal. Of the 172 farms with the state 20 produced organic animal products. Of the 20 producing animal products, 5 were producing beef animals. In 2008 these 5 farms produced 53 beef animals and sold products from 23 head for total sales of \$8,678. In comparison Florida vegetable producers in 2008 sold over 29 million dollars of organic labeled vegetables and melons, California farmers sold over 457 million dollars of organic vegetables and melons. Interestingly the primary production issue faced by Florida organic farms (36%) was regulatory problems.

To produce, label, market or advertise beef using the term “organic” producers and processing companies must each be certified by the USDA as organic producers. This is a highly involved process that requires time effort and documentation. To qualify for the organic label the following requirements must be met.

- Animals have to be produced and processed by a USDA certified organic farm and processor.
- The animals must be free on any antibiotics or growth hormones.
- They must be free of mammalian or poultry protein or by-products. Feed must not have been exposed to pesticides, fertilizers made from synthetic ingredients or bioengineering.
- Animals for slaughter must be raised under organic management for the last third of gestation.
- Producers are required to feed livestock agricultural feed products that are 100 percent organic but may also provide vitamin and mineral supplements.
- In order to produce 100 percent organic feed, the land will have no prohibited substance applied to it for at least three years before the harvest of an organic crop.
- The use of genetic engineering, ionizing radiation and sewer sludge is prohibited.
- Soil fertility and crop nutrients will be managed through tillage and cultivation practices, crop rotation and cover crops, supplemented with animal and crop waste materials and allowed synthetic materials.

- Preference will be given to the use of organic seed and other planting stock, but a producer may use nonorganic seed and planting stock under specific conditions.
- Crop pests, weeds and disease will be controlled p[rimarily through management practices including physical, mechanical and biological controls.
- When these practices are not sufficient a biological, botanical or synthetic substance approved for use on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances may be used.
- Preventive management practices including the use of vaccines will be used to keep animals healthy.
- Producers are prohibited from withholding treatment from sick or injured animals: however animals treated with a prohibited medication may not be sold as organic.
- All organically raised animals must have access to the outdoors, including access to pasture for ruminants. They may be temporarily confined only for reasons of health, safety, and animal's stage of production or to protect soil and water quality.

USDA makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food. Organic food differs from convention food in the way it is grown handled and processed.

The natural beef market has developed into a legitimate marketing option with incentives attractive enough to justify consideration. Before a cattle producer participates in a natural beef program, it's important to have an understanding of the natural beef requirements for the branded program they are interested in. There are numerous natural beef programs, each with it's own set of production requirements. Natural programs are different from organic programs in several ways. Natural programs are administered and regulated by the company or organization that owns the brand name not the USDA. To use the term natural on a food label the USDA only requires three things: (1) the product must be minimally processed (2) the product cannot contain any artificial ingredients and (3) the product cannot contain any preservatives. The USDA has no specific restrictions on management practices during the life of the animal.

In summary, natural beef programs are largely defined and regulated by the company that owns the brand. USDA requirements for natural beef are relatively simple, minimum processing, no artificial ingredients and no preservatives. USDA has no specific restrictions on management practices during the life of the animal.

Organic beef producers and processing companies must be certified by the USDA, which requires time, effort and documentation. Production and handling guidelines and restrictions must be followed for products to carry the USDA organic seal.

The natural and the organic beef markets will likely continue to grow in market share. The opportunity for some producers to capture greater value for their beef cattle by modifying their management practices to meet certain certified natural beef requirements will continue. Beef cattle producer must carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of participating in a natural program or a certified organic program for their own operation.